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Constructing a socially acceptable female identity: The case of nineteenth-century advice manuals for women

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ABSTRACT

In this study I conduct an exploratory corpus-based study of nineteenth-century advice manuals for women with a view to investigating the ways in which these texts ideologically and discursively construct a model of socially acceptable female identity. The analysis is based on a corpus of twenty advice manuals published in Britain between 1810 and 1878. By combining a quantitative analysis of keywords with manual investigation of concordance lines containing the most frequent keywords, I examine the parameters within which the model of socially acceptable female identity is discursively constructed. My analysis shows that, by learning to control their bodies, voices and speech, nineteenth-century women readers internalised the model presented in advice literature in order to become desirable to men of a good social position (Armstrong 2014).

Keywords: advice literature, women, identity, conduct, etiquette.

1. Introduction

In this contribution I am concerned with the ways in which nineteenth-century advice manuals for women ideologically and discursively construct a model of socially acceptable female identity. The dataset used comprises a small corpus of manuals in English published in Britain in the period between 1810 and 1878 and addressed to a generic middle- and lower-class target audience of women readers who were compelled to "examine their conduct, find it wanting, and apply themselves to correcting the faults they identify, so as to align their lives with the ideals found in the discourse" (Kukorelly

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2020: 127). Dominant conduct discourse throughout the nineteenth century aimed to disseminate ideas about how women were expected to appear and behave if they were to be treated not only as respectable members of society, but, most importantly, as covetable and eligible for marriage. Norms and codes of behaviour in advice manuals for women were thus explicitly presented as gendered, with women, their position in society, and their personal identity represented as completely different from that of men, and, contemporaneously, with women being complementary and subordinate to men in all spheres of life. In what follows, the analysis of my dataset shows how advice manuals partook in the ideological operation of disciplining women by imposing a model of socially acceptable female identity as one that was devoid of any real content. The main message that the manuals relentlessly pursue concerns the possibility for the ordinary female self to articulate itself in the "extraneous accomplishments" (*Mixing in Society*, [Anon. 1872: 99]) only and only to the extent to which this self was pleasing to the others.

The dataset analysed in this study can be considered representative of an extremely vast group of heterogeneous texts that were produced in the course of the nineteenth century for the benefit of women readers seeking instruction on contemporary norms of gendered behaviour.[1] The sample here includes shorter, programmatic guides dedicated exclusively to the rules of etiquette (e.g., *A Manual of Etiquette for Ladies* [Anon. 1856]; *Etiquette for Ladies* [Anon. 1857]); longer treatises on conduct containing separate sections for ladies and gentlemen respectively (e.g, *The Habits of Good Society* [Anon. 1859]; *Mixing in Society* [Anon. 1872]); popular early nineteenth-century comprehensive didactic manuals (e.g., *Advice to Young Ladies* [Broadhurst 1810]; *Practical Hints to Young Females* [Taylor 1815]), as well as beauty and fashion manuals (e.g., *Mirror of Graces* [Anon. 1811]; *The Art of Beauty* [Haweis 1878]). The manuals in question (or specific sections dedicated to women in generic manuals) can be considered to be examples of "sex-differentiated things" (Mills 2003: 18), that is to say, ideological products operating on the assumption that women and men, by virtue of being 'women' or 'men', ought to adopt distinctly different patterns of behaviour and assume different identities by naturalising the idea that social practices have to be gendered (cf. Lazar 2014). As Mills explains:

[1] Just how varied and large this body of texts was in the period between 1770 and 1900 is shown in the two six-volume editions of *Conduct Literature for Women. Part IV, 1770-1830* (Morris 2005) and *Conduct Literature for Women. Part V, 1830-1900* (Eden – Vickers – Morris 2006).

> the discourse of middle-class femininity in the nineteenth century consisted of the set of heterogeneous statements (i.e. those utterances, texts, gestures, behaviours which were accepted as describing the essence of Victorian womanhood: humility, sympathy, selflessness) and which constituted parameters within which middle-class women could work out their own sense of identity (1997: 62).

Advice manuals in the corpus under investigation offer many examples of such heterogeneous statements delineating "a homogeneous ideal-type of womanly behaviour" (Kukorelly 2020: 123) which their readers are exhorted to imitate. In the following discussion, by combining quantitative analysis of keywords with close readings of selected concordance lines, I intend to show that the parameters that this discourse of femininity produced were defined in such a way as to deny any room for individual women to work out a of sense of identity of their own. Put simply, the restrictions imposed on the users of these manuals were such as to obliterate any timid attempt to pursue an independent "project of the self" (Benwell – Stokoe 2006: 18).

2. Theoretical framework

My approach to the theorisation of identity relies on the broad theoretical paradigm that recognises an anti-essentialist view of identity (Foucault 1972). As is well known, this paradigm emphasises the role that dominant discourse and ideology play in the shaping of the discursive construction of identity. This discursive model, as Benwell and Stokoe explain, "presumes all meaning to be situated not within the self, but in a series of representations mediated by semiotic systems such as language" (2006: 31). Referring to Howard's (2000: 385) notion of the 'ideological constitution of the self', Benwell and Stokoe draw our attention to the potential of dominant discourses to "shape and direct the individual":

> If our identities are inscribed in available discourses, then these processes may operate to reproduce social inequalities […] In this account, the development of the individual becomes a process of acquiring a particular ideological version of the world, liable to serve hegemonic ends and preserve the status quo. Identity or identification thus becomes a colonising force, shaping and directing the individual (2006: 31).

Sex-differentiated advice literature subscribes to an ideological vision of society in which inequalities at all levels are justified and naturalised, first of

all, on the basis of gender. By mobilising and promoting specific ideological beliefs and values, the manuals in the corpus under investigation lay bare a set of expectations about women's gendered identities and their position in society as gendered beings. These gendered identities are discursively constructed by offering a set of representations of what counts as acceptable social behaviour for nineteenth-century women.

To the considerations on the discursive dimension of the 'ideological constitution of the self', it is necessary to add the layer of performativity[2] as elaborated on by Butler (1990, 1993). In Butler's (1990) reformulation of the discursive model of identity, the model is reconfigured to include "also a *performance* with all the connotations of non-essentialism, transience, versatility and masquerade that this implies" (Benwell – Stokoe 2006: 33, original emphasis). This aspect of performativity is of central importance in an investigation of the ideological dimension of the discourse of advice literature. With the minute descriptions of how their women readers were to sound, look, move, stand, and so on, all of which were presented "as if [they] were commonsense" (Mills 2003: 15), nineteenth-century advice manuals participated in the effort to regulate and naturalise the performance of the everyday gendered rituals. The work of advice literature was directed at persuading women to adopt the ready-made solutions (cf. Kukorelly 2020) that instructed them on how they were to perform the appropriate gender role and assume a socially acceptable female identity. In the next sections I will examine the building blocks of this identity as it is constructed in the discourse of nineteenth-century advice manuals.

3. Dataset and methodology

In this section, I present the dataset that will be used to conduct an exploratory, qualitatively-oriented study of a small dataset comprising twenty different English advice manuals for women.[3] The corpus with the full texts of the twenty manuals under investigation contains 1,100,000 tokens. In order to be able to combine the quantitative analysis of keywords with focused

[2] In her discussion of the everyday performance of rituals, Butler argues that "[g]ender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being" (1990: 33).

[3] To the best of my knowledge, this methodology has so far been applied in studies investigating conduct literature for women in languages other than English (cf. Paternoster 2019).

qualitative readings of selected concordance lines and extended portions of the texts, I extracted a 70,000-word sub-set, dealing specifically with the topic of conversation, from the larger, 1,100,000-word corpus. The small Conversation corpus collects dedicated sections on conversation[4] included in the majority (thirteen out of twenty) manuals, together with selected excerpts from the other seven manuals that discuss the rules of conversation as applied to women specifically. Table 1 presents an overview of the manuals and information about the specific parts dedicated to conversation that were extracted and analysed:

Table 1. List of manuals with/without a dedicated section on conversation

Year of publication, author	Short title	Section on conversation
1810, Broadhurst	*Advice to Young Ladies*	no dedicated section
1811, Anon.	*Mirror of Graces*	no dedicated section
1813, Anon.	*A Father's Advice to His Daughter*	included (a dedicated tale)
1815, Stewart	*The Young Woman's Companion*	included
1815, Taylor	*Practical Hints to Young Females*	no dedicated section
1840, Anon.	*The Ladies' Pocket-Book of Etiquette*	included
1841, Anon.	*The English Maiden*	no dedicated section
1845, Ellis	*The Women of England*	included
1847, Butcher	*Instructions in Etiquette*	included
1849, Anon.	*The English Gentlewoman*	included
1854, Anon.	*Etiquette, Social Ethics, etc.*	no dedicated section
1855, Anon.	*The Ladies' Guide to Etiquette,*	included
1856, Anon.	*A Manual of Etiquette for Ladies*	included
1857, Anon.	*Etiquette for Ladies*	included
1859, Anon.	*The Habits of Good Society*	no dedicated section
1859, Maxwell	*Advice to Young Ladies*	no dedicated section
1872, Anon.	*Mixing in Society*	included (a dedicated tale)
1875, Anon.	*All about Etiquette*	included
1876, Anon.	*Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen*	no dedicated section
1878, Haweis	*The Art of Beauty*	included

[4] A dedicated section usually means a chapter, typically entitled "On Conversation" or "Rules for Conversation" (for example, in *The Young Woman's Companion* [Stewart 1815: 361-376]) or simply "Conversation" (see Chapter IV in *Mixing in Society* [Anon. 1872: 89-100]).

The topic of conversation was chosen because it represents one of the key foci of the normative discourse concerned with women's appropriate behaviour. Conversation, just as it continues to be today (Lakoff 1975, Cameron 2012, Talbot 2019),[5] was one of the key sites of identity work in the nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century women were indoctrinated with the idea that conversation was "a reflex of character" (*Mixing in Society*, Anon. 1872: 99) and repeatedly instructed to pay the utmost attention not only to what they talked about, but to how they sounded and what kind of language they used.

The examination of the top keywords extracted from the smaller subset dedicated to conversation[6] can provide some preliminary information about the specific topics that appear to be most relevant in the advice discourse regulating women's behaviour. Table 2 provides an overview of the top ten keywords in the corpus (column 2), together with the top ten keywords per individual category (columns 3 to 6):[7]

Table 2. Keywords in the Conversation corpus

ID	Top 10 keywords (types)	Top 10 keywords (nouns)	Top 10 keywords (verbs)	Top 10 keywords (adjectives)	Top 10 keywords (others)
1	conversation	conversation (1)	is (4)	young (12)	or (3)
2	society	society (2)	be (6)	own (23)	your (5)
3	or	woman (9)	are (7)	every (31)	if (13)
4	is	others (10)	may (8)	good (32)	her (15)
5	your	lady (17)	should (11)	agreeable (84)	never (16)
6	be	company (21)	will (14)	general (88)	their (18)

[5] Cf. also Lazar's discussion of voice and communicative styles in the public sphere today: "[t]he accepted communicative style of power and authority in the public sphere is decidedly masculine (e.g., in terms of tone of voice, intonation in giving orders, and use of direct speech acts), which makes it difficult for women (especially in senior management positions) to get their communicative styles 'right' and to be taken seriously" (Lazar 2014: 184).

[6] For the retrieval of the keyword list, I used the open-source corpus analysis tool, #LancsBox version 4.0 (Brezina – McEnery – Wattam 2015; Brezina et al. Forthc.), with the sub-section of the *Corpus of Late Modern English Texts* (*CLMET 3.0*, De Smet 2005; De Smet –Diller –Tyrkkö) covering the period between 1780 and 1850 (99 texts, 11,202,550 tokens) used as a reference corpus. The same software was used to inspect concordance lines containing the relevant lexical items.

[7] The numbers in brackets indicate the ranking position of the individual keywords in the list of the top 150 keywords.

7	are	knowledge (22)	cannot (20)	female (103)	you (19)
8	may	persons (24)	talk (26)	ill (107)	she (25)
9	woman	attention (30)	let (44)	other (113)	who (27)
10	others	mind (33)	must (56)	best (123)	always (28)

In the sections that follow, the manual analysis of the concordance lines containing the most frequent keywords in the corpus will be boosted by integrating the theoretical framework of Appraisal (Martin – White 2005) applied specifically to the examination of evaluative adjectives used to present rules and norms of behaviour to the manuals' women readers. In adopting this approach, I draw on Paternoster's (2019) work treating historical etiquette books in Italian, with its focus on prescriptive metadiscourse and evaluative language. More specifically, in this study Paternoster is concerned with assessing changes in the nineteenth-century conceptualisation of politeness in Italy through an investigation of evaluative language limited to the Appraisal system of Judgement (Martin – White 2005). By adapting the theoretical framework of Appraisal (Martin – White 2005) to study the relationship between politeness and other values linked to behaviour, Paternoster emphasises the role of Judgement, one of the two major evaluative systems comprising Affect (in Martin and White's semantic system for evaluation). Judgement can be presented as an evaluative sub-system concerned with ethical appraisal, that is to say, with "attitudes towards behaviour, which we admire or criticise, praise or condemn" (Martin – White 2005: 42), as well as institutionalised morality, given that it "reworks feelings in the realm of proposals about behaviour – how we should behave or not" (Martin – White [2005: 45], quoted in Paternoster [2019: 116]). Integrating Martin and White's framework with Kádár and Haugh's (2013) insights on the interrelationship between politeness and interpersonal evaluation, Paternoster foregrounds the role of politeness evaluators, that is to say, "descriptors or metalanguage used by members to conceptualise their social world" (Kádár – Haugh [2013: 94], quoted in Paternoster [2019: 117]), in her attempt "to develop a lexical, or conceptual, map of positive evaluative terms present in turn-of-the-century [Italian] etiquette books" (Paternoster 2019: 118). These evaluative terms are examined in Paternoster's study as "a window on the values that determine a historical social practice" (2019: 118).[8]

[8] See Paternoster (2019: 118-120) for a detailed description of her model. As to her dataset, Paternoster manually collected and then selected, based on their frequencies,

As already mentioned, Paternoster's focus was on the subsection of Judgement, specifically in the two main categories of the subsection represented by Social Esteem (relating to behaviours that we "admire") and Social Sanction (comprising terms that "praise" behaviour (Martin – White [2005: 53], quoted in Paternoster [2019: 121/125]). The examination of the former of the two fields and, specifically, of the three groups of evaluative adjectives representing, respectively, Normality (which indexes social distinction), Capacity (which indexes intellectual value), and the Tenacity group (which indexes one's self-discipline) leads Paternoster to conclude that

> Social Esteem gives a fairly precise idea of the qualities that the perfect gentleman/lady has to possess before he/she becomes eligible for social interaction: what does it take to be admitted to the social network of the happy few? There are three main requirements: to be of superior social standing, to be intelligent, to have self-discipline. In contrast to conduct books, centred on social advancement, in etiquette books social distinction takes on a renewed ideological importance, which is shown first and foremost in the total occurrences of the members of the semantic group Normality, which is the most frequent set within Social Esteem (2019: 125).

In the second field of Social Sanction, Paternoster looked at the categories of Veracity and Politeness,[9] whose subsets include Politeness, Conformity, Affection, Goodness and Pleasure. It is expected that, similarly to findings discussed in Paternoster's study of nineteenth-century Italian advice discourse, the field of Social Esteem (and especially, the group of Normality), as well as the field of Social Sanction (Pleasure), which focuses "on a specific kind of pleasure, conflict-free interaction" (Paternoster 2019: 133), will be characteristic of nineteenth-century advice discourse in English as well.

The manual inspection of the concordance lines presented in the next section aims to shed light on the linguistic resources the manual authors drew on in order to present their views on a specific version of a socially acceptable female identity in the "Conversation" corpus. The analysis of their assumptions and prescribed rules, as well as the strategies they

a set of 275 adjective types which were subsequently annotated for their evaluative meanings according to different semantic categories and analysed (2019: 120-121).

9 With the latter category being re-named Politeness from the original Propriety (Paternoster 2019: 125) as proposed in Martin and White (2005).

used to encourage some behaviours, condemning, at the same time, other behaviours, can help unveil these authors' ideas about a particular gendered ideological version of the world.

4. Analysis

The collection of texts that the Conversation corpus under investigation is comprised of focuses on the ways a generic (literate) nineteenth-century English woman reader[10] is expected to behave in interactions with others. Her demeanour is scrutinised and criticised in order to justify the need to provide detailed advice on how to use her voice, to adjust her manner of speaking, to select the topics of conversation, and, most importantly, to improve her skills to please her interlocutors. The starting point for this discussion is the taken-for-granted assumption that a woman's character will be revealed in her mastery (or lack thereof) of proper conversational skills. Thus conversation is represented as much more than merely "a high essential in polite society" (*A Manual of Etiquette for Ladies,* Anon. [1856: 22]). In fact, conversation is treated as "the medium by which knowledge is communicated, affection enkindled, sorrow comforted, error reclaimed, and piety incited" (*Instructions in Etiquette*, Butcher [1847: 88]). It is in its higher qualities, as another author points out, that "the higher qualities of the mind" (*The English Gentlewoman*, Anon. [1849: 42]) come to the fore. In other words, a woman's inner self is expected to become known to others in conversation.

Contradictions, however, cannot be avoided. For example, a number of manuals agree that women are "great talkers naturally" (*Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen*, Anon. [1876: 44]) and conversation can be presented as a woman's "peculiar power" (*The Ladies' Pocket Book of Etiquette*, Anon. [1840: 52]). At the same time, the authors insist on the fact that women need dedicated instruction on developing conversational skills. In fact, it is underlined that they have to be taught how to converse just as they would be taught philosophy or composition (*The English Maiden*, Anon. [1841: 60-61]).

[10] With ephemeral texts such as the manuals under discussion here, it is challenging to recover any definitive information as to the identity of the specific target audience group. Who they were written for, who actually bought them and followed the advice given, are questions that represent a major challenge for scholars interested in this kind of popular non-fictional literature. My focus in this study is on the manuals themselves and the idea of a gendered world they bring to life, in a fashion that is adopted in a number of studies dealing with present-day women's (and men's) lifestyle magazines.

Being able to converse "with propriety and elegance" is elevated to be one of the most valuable accomplishments for a woman:

(1) an accomplishment, that beyond all others promotes the happiness of home, enlivens society, and improves upon every other blessing in existence […]. How many excellent women are deficient in the power of expressing themselves well, or, indeed, of expressing themselves at all! (*The English Gentlewoman*, Anon. [1849: 41])

The longer excerpt in (1) contains some evaluative lexis, such as *excellent* and *deficient*, two evaluative adjectives belonging to the category of Capacity in the field of Social Esteem. Capacity, as already explained above, "indicates an intellectual type of distinction achieved through rationality and intrinsic merit" (Paternoster 2019: 123). According to Paternoster, Capacity is linked to Pleasure in the field of Social Sanction through its association "with intelligence and reason, which are the very tools used to establish what counts as pleasing behaviour" (2019: 135).

It is not unexpected that, in a handful of these manuals, references should be made to the acquisition of good speaking manners as a prerequisite for successful social advancement. Here women aspiring to pass as ladies in polite society are reminded that

(2) [t]he moment a woman speaks, you can tell whether you are listening to a lady or not. The tone of the voice, the accent, the use of peculiar phrases,[11] at once determine whether she is only an educated woman, but unused to good society; or a (perhaps) less educated person, but still used to associate with well-bred people (*Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen*, Anon. [1876: 45]).

In (2) we again find evaluative lexis from the category of Capacity (e.g., several repetitions of *educated*), but we also have an example (*well-bred*) from the

[11] Some authors, in addition to dispensing with generic observations on the use of "grammatical English" or the importance of speaking without a provincial accent (*Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen* [Anon. 1876: 45]; *Etiquette for Ladies* [Anon. 1857: 34]) also offer specific examples of expressions ladies are not allowed to use. For example, in *All about Etiquette* we are told that "[i]f you mean that you were angry, do not say you were 'mad' – 'It made me so mad,' 'I was quite mad at her,'' are phrases not to be used by people considering themselves genteel. Anger and madness are not the same, or should not be; though it is true that ungoverned rage is sometimes carried so far as to seem insanity" (*All about Etiquette* [Anon. 1875: 323]). It has to be said that these authors pay relatively little attention to the linguistically prescriptive aspect.

subset of Normality, another category from the field of Social Esteem. The terms comprising the subset of Normality show "how important social distinction is for etiquette books, which strive for exclusive behaviour, and this is reflected in adjectives indicating behaviour that is normal, typical, for the top layer of society" (Paternoster 2019: 122), or, as in this case, a (true) 'lady'. In a similar vein, another author cautions his/her readers that "the first sentence a woman utters spoils her […] The soul, say the poet, is not in the eye, but in the voice. At all events, we can take ready measure of your intellect and character by your conversation; and your culture is at once *disclosed* by it" (*Etiquette for Ladies*, Anon. [1857: 34]).

Yet references to conversational skills as a tool for social advancement are rare. Generally speaking, as the manual inspection of the concordance lines containing the keywords *conversation, society, woman, lady, company, others,* and *agreeable* has shown, the distinction of class (between, for example, middle-class and upper-class women), is given less weight compared to the distinction based on gender. Women, regardless of their social status, are exhorted to "acquire that delightful and easy manner of address and behaviour in all useful correspondences, which may render [their] company every where desired and beloved" (*The Young Woman's Companion,* Stewart [1815: 373]). *Delightful* and *easy* are two examples of evaluative adjectives representing the subset of Pleasure in the field of Social Sanction. In Paternoster's dataset, evaluative adjectives expressing Pleasure are further subdivided into the two sub-groups of 'agreeable' and 'pleasant' (2019: 132-133). The larger group combining the two "positively evaluate[s] sensations of wellbeing and happiness" and serves as indicative of a kind of politeness "based on a rational weighing of the others' desires for wellbeing in interaction" (Paternoster 2019: 132; 133). As will be shown in the next sub-sections, the role of the evalutaive lexis from the category of Pleasure is central to the authors' effort to convince women readers to accept their duty of having to please male interlocutors in conversation. This duty clearly emerges as the main preoccupation with the authors of this type of advice literature.

The more specialised topics that reintroduce and discursively fine-tune the idea of women's conversational obligations are discussed in the next sub-sections. Among these we find paramount importance given to "an agreeable voice" (which, as we are told, is more important than beauty); the importance of proper listening skills, as well as the importance of carefully selecting topics for conversation that women are/are not allowed or expected to engage in. These topics continue to be consistently framed

within the larger ideological version of the world in which, as already hinted at, a woman's self is discursively constructed as a self that comes into being in interactions with others with the sole purpose of pleasing her interlocutors.

4.1 The focus on voice

One of the core rules presented to the readers of advice literature for women concerns the importance of "an agreeable voice." The manuals argue that men prefer "an agreeable voice" over "any amount of beauty" (*The Habits of Good Society* [Anon. 1859: 98]). The specific characteristics of such a voice are defined through evaluative lexis representing the category of Pleasure. In fact, an agreeable voice will be "melodious and well-regulated" (*The Women of England* [Ellis 1845: 209]) or "'gentle and low [being] above all other extraneous accomplishments, 'an excellent thing in woman'" (*Mixing in Society* [Anon. 1872: 99]). The woman's agreeable voice "invests a woman with a potent sway, even though she lack the possession of beauty and personal charms" (*The Ladies' Guide to Etiquette* [Anon. 1855: 17]). The voice, combined with proper conversational skills, becomes the most powerful tool a woman can have to conquer the right man's heart:

(3) it is indeed no uncommon thing to see a young lady of ordinary features, and without any other influence than a sparkling wit and persuasive eloquence, completely captivate the *preux chevalier* of an assembly, to the surprise and mortification of the more handsome but less accomplished rival (*The Ladies' Guide to Etiquette* [Anon. 1855: 17]).

On the contrary, any serious fault with a woman's voice is interpreted as a sign of a faulty character. For example, a voice that is too low is taken to reveal that the woman is "sullen, sulky, obstinate", while shrill voices belong to "petulant, pert, impatient" women (*Mirror of Graces* [Anon. 1811: 200]). Such vocal "aberrations" need to be corrected lest they discourage their prospective suitors. It is explained, for example, that "merely for the tone of voice which did not quite harmonize with their ears, [some sensible men] have dropped the connection with women who, in all other points, were unexceptionable" (*Mirror of Graces* [Anon. 1811: 201]). What is striking in these passages is the quantity of negative evaluative lexis from the field of Social Sanction, used unsparingly to stigmatise forms of behaviour that do not conform to the given model of femininity.

At the same time, even an agreeable woman's voice must be used in a prudent way. Women are in fact encouraged to become diligent listeners: "from her position in society, it is the peculiar province of a woman, rather to lead others out into animated and intelligent communication, than to be intent upon making communications from the resources of her own mind" (*The Women of England*, Ellis [1845: 196-197]). A woman's superior listening skills will guarantee that "[s]he will please more [by being a good and animated listener], than by any display of her own knowledge and acquirements" (*Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen*, Anon. 1876: 48). The roles that interlocutors are to play in conversation are thus clearly assigned on the basis of gender: women are told to do the most listening, while men are given the privilege of doing the most speaking. The reference to character is found again in the discussion of the listening skills a woman must master: her character, she is told, will be revealed not only in her manner of speaking, but in her manner of listening and "gently sympathising" with the speaker (*The English Gentlewoman*, Anon. [1849: 46]).

4.2 The focus on topics

The (limited) range of topics that women could be allowed and expected to engage in polite company is dealt with extensively in the manuals under investigation. The general agreement is that women should "be well informed, and capable of conversing rationally on general topics" (*A Manual of Etiquette for Ladies* [Anon. 1856: 22]). In passages describing women's contributions to conversation, the main type of evaluative lexis used (e.g. *well informed*, capable) is again represented (cf. Section 4) by the category of Capacity in the field of Social Esteem).

As one of the authors explains,

(4) [o]ne does not wish to hear a lady talk politics nor a smattering of science; but she should be able to understand and listen with interest when politics are discussed, and to appreciate in some degree the conversation of scientific men (*Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen*, Anon. [1876: 47]).[12]

[12] According to Tablot, "[t]his is in line with the pronouncements of the Greek philosophers […] Aristotle, for example, wrote that women should be prevented from taxing their brains with things like political activity, because it would dry up their wombs" (2019: 201).

Women are admonished to avoid any "injudicious attempt" at starting an argument with gentlemen on political, scientific or financial topics, on the grounds that their knowledge of such subjects "is so small in comparison with the knowledge of men that the discussion will not elevate them in the opinion of masculine minds" (*All about Etiquette* [Anon. 1875: 210]). The same author, however, concedes that

(5) it is well for a woman to desire enlightenment, that she may comprehend something of these discussions when she hears them from the other sex, but let her refrain from controversy and argument on such topics, as the grasp of the female mind is seldom capable of seizing or retaining. Men are very intolerant toward women who are prone to contradiction and contention when the talk is of things considered out of their sphere, but very indulgent toward a modest and attentive listener, who only asks questions for the sake of information. Men like to dispense knowledge; but few of them believe that, in departments exclusively their own, they can profit much by the suggestions of women (*All about Etiquette* [Anon. 1875: 210-211]).

The ideal for women is explicitly presented as that of a *modest* and *attentive* listener, two characteristics that represent the category of Goodness in the field of Social Sanction whose function is to "promote concern for the welfare of others" (Paternoster 2019: 132). This concern can also be interpreted as a face-saving strategy necessary in those cases where a woman's educational achievements can risk undermining the merits of her interlocutors:

(6) Do not make a parade of your learning if you have any, 'a little learning is a dangerous thing,' and few women have more than a little. If you are really well-informed, you may choose subjects which may instruct in conversation, but men, in particular, have a dislike to women who seem too sensible of their literary acquirements (*Advice to Young Ladies,* Maxwell [1859: 23]).[13]

Such restrictions on the range of topics available to women makes it inevitable that women easily fall victims to the vice of gossiping:

[13] Here Maxwell appears to be repeating what has already been said by one of her predecessors: "But if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts and a cultivated understanding" (*The Young Woman's Companion,* Stewart [1815: 374]).

(7) The multifarious pursuits of business and politics, or the labours of scientific and professional studies, engross [the thoughts of the men], and necessarily lead them to more elevated and expansive channels. Women, acting in a narrower sphere, examine with extreme ardour, whatever falls under their observation, or enter into competition with them. When employments weary, or amusements fail, *character* is a favourite field in which to expatiate. By nature they are gifted with a facility for reading its idioms. But if they indulge themselves in searching out only its weaknesses, – if they form a taste for hunting down its deformities, and feeding, like the hyena, upon its fleshless, lifeless carcass, are they not in danger of perverting the tides of benevolent feeling, and tinging the fountain of the heart with bitterness? (*Instructions in Etiquette* [Butcher 1847: 83]).

In order to escape such dangers, women are not only told to "[a]void, as far as possible, all personal conversation" (*Instructions in Etiquette* [Butcher 1847: 84]), but to "select the subjects of conversation best suited to [their] auditors, and to pursue them just so long as they excite interest, and engage attention" (*The Women of England* [Ellis 1845: 203]).[14] Most importantly, women are required to develop the ability to accommodate their interlocutors' needs and interests, that is to say, to take up and react to the thoughts of others, so as to keep the ball rolling (*Etiquette for Ladies* [Anon. 1857: 35]). All of this is summarised by Ellis in the following way:

(8) There is scarcely any source of enjoyment more immediately connected at once with the heart and with the mind, than that of listening to a sensible and amiable woman, when she converses in a melodious and well-regulated voice, when her language and pronunciation are easy and correct, and when she knows how to adapt her conversation to the characters and habits of those around her (*The Women of England* [Ellis 1845: 209]).

Example (8) stands out for the density of evaluative adjectives (*sensible* and *amiable, melodious* and *well-regulated, easy* and *correct*) that represent the category of Pleasure in the field of Social Sanction. The quotation that

[14] A number of manuals give more or less detailed instructions on what NOT to talk about (for example, no personal conversations about oneself, other people or family affairs in *The English Gentlewoman* [Anon. 1849: 44]) or examples of how to adjust the topic according to one's interlocutor in *Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen* (Anon. 1876).

follows contains additional items from the same category (e.g., *pleasant* and *profitable*) in the author's comment on the true reasons as to why a woman should be educated: "[i]n order to converse agreeably and intelligibly, a lady should cultivate her intellect, not with the idea of becoming a blue-stocking or a pedant, but to render her society pleasant and profitable to others" (*A Manual of Etiquette for Ladies* [Anon. 1856: 24]). Even the few authors who defend – against all odds – a woman's right to education, are careful to clarify that being well-educated will help women to become better friends, wives, and mothers:

(9) Some persons, I am aware, will be ready to exclaim at the sight of an outline so unusual, To what end is all this knowledge in women? or why, in the attainment of it, should they be taken away from their peculiar sphere in society, and assume the privileges of the nobler sex? of man, whose acknowledged province it is to read, to study, to think, to write, to legislate, and to govern ? of man, the lord of the creation, and second in rank and power to the angels only ? In reply to this objection, I beg leave to bring to your recollection the sentiments delivered to you in my first address, when I stated the vast utility of a well-cultivated mind to the female sex, as it regards their character and influence in general society, as it relates to the connubial state, and as it is connected with the judicious management and careful education of a rising family (*Advice to Young Ladies,* Broadhurst 1810: 68).

Having described in detail what women are allowed and encouraged to talk about, and how, authors remind their readers about "the most essential rule for good talk", that is to say

(10) *to have something to say*. Do not be afraid, then, of reading and observing too much. Men of sense do not like a blue stocking who is a slattern or a hoyden: but, as a great man once observed, it does not matter how blue the stocking is, so long as the robe of feminine feeling is long enough to cover it (*Etiquette for Ladies* [Anon. 1857: 34]).

4.3 The focus on looks

As the examples discussed in sub-sections 4.1 and 4.2 show, the authors of advice manuals tend to present their model of acceptable female behaviour by overwhelming their readers with a battery of prescriptive do's and don't's, or behavioural maxims (Weller 2014). In addition to this fairly straightforward

method of attempted indoctrination, in a handful of manuals the authors prefer to realise their goal by integrating in the text elaborate descriptions of, on the one hand, ideal and, on the other hand, 'deviating' female characters.[15] These dedicated narratives routinely detail the ways in which idealised and compliant female characters are rewarded for their conformity to the models disseminated in the manuals, while non-conforming characters are punished for their refusal to comply. Unsurprisingly, the reward is presented in the form of a marriage proposal from a worthy gentleman. The punishment, on the other hand, is represented in the impossibility of finding a suitable match. The English version of the French collection of "instructive narratives" (*A Father's Advice to His Daughter*, Anon. [1813: title page])[16] is the first manual in the Conversation corpus that offers an example of this strategy in the dedicated and lengthy story tellingly entitled "The Charm of a Sweet Voice" (Anon. 1813: 77-100).[17]

Shorter sketches that pay tribute to the same tradition of the didactic narrative genre by featuring mostly misbehaving female characters are found, for example, in *The English Gentlewoman* (Anon. 1849: 41-42), as well as in *The Habits of Good Society* (Anon. 1859: 263-269). In the second manual, the author dedicates several pages to the description of a number of special 'types' of ladies who do not conform to the prescribed model of femininity. These 'types' include:

• The fast young lady, described as "the hoyden of the old comedies, without the indelicacy of that character", or, in other words, someone who is "violently confident", with "a hard *blasé* look; a free tongue", with a preference for male company (*The Habits of Good Society* [Anon. 1859: 266]). This character is condemned for her lack of femininity, and warned that

(11) the instant a woman loses the true feminine type, she parts with half her influence. The 'fast girl' is flattered, admired openly, but secretly

[15] This strategy has already been identified by Kukorelly (2020) in her discussion of the denunciation of anger in advice literature for women.

[16] An English translation of the original French manual entitled *Conseils à ma fille; ou, Nouveaux contes*, by J. N. Bouilly, published in London by H. Colburn in 1813.

[17] The storyline of "The Charm of a Sweet Voice" can be briefly summarised as follows: a distinguished military gentleman in search of a wife is introduced to three young ladies whose merits and demerits are discussed in detail. Their major demerits concern either their flawed conversational skills or faulty voices. In the end, the gentleman chooses a fourth lady as his life companion. The lady wins his heart thanks to superior conversational skills and an angelic voice (*A Father's Advice to His Daughter* [Anon. 1813: 89-90]).

> condemned. Many a plain woman has gained and kept a heart by being merely womanly and gentle (*The Habits of Good Society* [Anon. 1859: 267]).

Other special 'types' of badly behaved young ladies include

• The "jolly girl", that is to say, a loud, high-spirited, overbearing woman (*The Habits of Good Society*, Anon. [1859: 267]);

• The "chaff" or the "masculine" lady, notorious for her reckless flirtation, a loud voice, jokes, and so on (*The Habits of Good Society*, Anon. [1859: 269]).[18]

This overview concludes with two more 'types': "the prude, who sees harm in everything, and her friend the blue-stocking" (*The Habits of Good Society*, Anon. [1859: 269]).

A similar classification of non-comforming and non-compliant female characters is presented in *The Art of Beauty* (Haweis 1878).[19] Here the author decides to divide young women into the two 'scientific' categories of "the Visible and the Invisible":

(12) A girl is Invisible when for any reason she fails to attract: and to attract is the indispensable attribute of woman *per se,* without which she may be, no doubt, a capital individual, lay-figure, buffer, 'brick,' or anything else good in its way, but not a woman: just as a magnet that has lost its magnetism might be called a good stone, a weight, a stopper, or what not, but hardly a magnet (*The Art of Beauty,* Haweis [1878: 259]).

To the "Visible" class belong women who are handsome, talented, brilliant, learned and indispensable (*The Art of Beauty,* Haweis [1878: 260]). Such women have the duty of being visible, as "[b]eauty blushing unseen is

[18] The "chaff" features in another manual published in the same year: "A bold masculine deportment in woman may amuse for a time, but a man of right feelings would startle at the thought of uniting his fate with one whose sole delight seemed in crowds and assemblies" (*Advice to Young Ladies,* Maxwell 1859: 28).

[19] As its title makes clear, this manual is concerned first and foremost with matters related to beauty (e.g., dress, head-dresses, etc.). However, its project of improving a young woman's life is much more ambitious than that, and this is why Haweis includes a dedicated section in the book (Book 4, "The Garden of Girls", 1878: 255-295) in which she discusses norms of young women's behaviour.

a waste of wealth which political economy forbids us to sanction" (*The Art of Beauty,* Haweis [1878: 259]). The second category includes everybody else, but here a more fine-grained operation is performed by sub-dividing the class of "the Invisible" into several sub-classes and sub-categories of sub-class:

(13) Under the Class II. *Invisible*, we place
A The Nonentity.
B The Ill-educated.
C The Stupid.
D The Ordinary or Plain.
E The Discouraged.
The latter subdivision may be further subdivided into the
1. The Naturally shy.
2. The Family-ridden.
3. The *Passée*.

(*The Art of Beauty,* Haweis [1878: 260])

In order to support her attempt at a 'scientific' classification, Haweis offers some statistical data on the number of males for each female in England. She then proceeds to urge those women who "do not even try to be agreeable to look at" (*The Art of Beauty,* Haweis [1878: 262]) to think about

(14) how numerous they are, and the small absolute need men have of wives; but, nevertheless, men do still marry, and would oftener marry could they find mates – women who are either helpful to them, or amusing, or pleasing to their eye (*The Art of Beauty,* Haweis [1878: 262-263]).

Haweis dedicates two sub-sections in her manual to a more detailed description illustrating each sub-class, including the sub-categories of the "Invisible" type (*The Art of Beauty*, Haweis [1878: 266-275]), and to illustrating the behaviour of these 'anomalous' female characters in a range of fictionalised settings (for example, in social interactions at a garden party, *The Art of Beauty*, Haweis [1878: 276-295]). Haweis insists that she offers this classification in order to help the women who identify with individual sub-classes to transform themselves into the "helpful, or amusing, or pleasing to the eye" and, ultimately, to become "Visible" (*The Art of Beauty,* Haweis [1878: 265]). This, she believes, is the only possible and rational line of action her readers are expected to embrace and adhere to.

5. Discussion

The discourse of advice literature is an example of a naturalised narrative that "encode[s] and preserve[s] key ideological assumptions" (Benwell – Stokoe 2006: 175). This discourse is 'gendered' (Sunderland 2004) in that advice literature for women clearly aims to impose a particular model of a socially acceptable female identity. At the same time, this discourse reveals the contradictions inherent in any attempt to define and discipline a group's identity. As the analysis in the previous sections has shown, these self-help manuals appear to subscribe to the ideology of "identity as a 'project of the self" (Benwell" – Stokoe 2006: 18). In fact, by entrusting individual women with the task of improving themselves, of fashioning their identities – albeit within the rigid constraints that are imposed on them – the manuals promote the ideology of individual responsibility for one's situation in life. This responsibility, moreover, is made to look appealing through the use of mainly positive evaluative language whose function is to gently coerce women into becoming agreeable and pleasing in exchange for making a good marriage match. On the other hand, the rigid script of "the subjected, structured self, produced via a set of identifications in discourse" (Benwell – Stokoe 2006: 30) disseminated through advice literature presents the model of female identity as that of a human being whose project of the self excludes the idea of the self as her own. Ellis, for example, explicitly defines woman as a "relative creature":

(15) Women, considered in their distinct and abstract nature, as isolated beings, must lose more than half their worth. They are, in fact, from their own constitution, and from the station they occupy in the world, strictly speaking, relative creatures. If, therefore, they are endowed only with such faculties as render them striking and distinguished in themselves, without the faculty of instrumentality, they are only as dead letters in the volume of human life, filling what would otherwise be a blank space, but doing nothing more (*The Women of England*, Ellis [1845: 209-210]).

Even when this ideological version of the world is not presented in such explicit terms, the same message is conveyed by disciplining women into listening, rather than speaking, or into choosing only a limited number of topics for conversation, as well as into doing their "best to be agreeable" (*Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen*, Anon. [1876: 52]) to others. A woman's

duty to please and be the perfect companion defines her self, leaving no room for any independent sense of identity of her own. It is as if advice literature took up Taylor's (1989) intersubjective concept of the reflective self, which sees a self "only in relation to certain interlocutors" (Benwell – Stokoe 2006: 35), and applied the concept exactingly by degrading women to the status of complementary, "relative" human beings.

The performative dimension of this ideological operation comes to the fore in the detailed guidelines made available to 'help' women monitor their external behaviour. The thoroughness with which the author of the following passage describes the smallest details of the appropriate female body language is striking:

(16) If the whole of the company be standing, and you are addressed by any one in particular, you must immediately direct your whole attention to him only. Your body perfectly upright, but not stiff, a little turned to the right or left, with the face completely towards him, looking a little over one shoulder, the arms across the waist, the upper hand open, or the hands clasped and hanging down in front, one foot advanced a little, the body resting upon that foot which is behind. If the person who speaks to you is giving any directions, every time you think it necessary to assent, incline the body and head gracefully forward. Should the individual present any thing, you keep the body bent until you have received it; and when you leave him, slide smoothly away, sinking at the same time (*Instructions in Etiquette,* Butcher 1 [847: 32]).

The manuals discussed in this paper exemplify attempts to get women to perform a specific female identity. By learning to control their bodies, voices and speech, nineteenth-century women readers were expected to internalise the rigid parameters of their assigned identity of a second-class member of society. Scholars such as Mills, speaking about nineteenth-century conduct books, argue that the proliferation of advice manuals on women's conduct should be read as being indicative of women's resistance to gendered discourses of subordination, rather than as evidence of women's oppression (Mills 1997: 90). It is certainly true that the analysis conducted in this study hints at anxieties in contemporary society triggered by the changes in the social position of women.[20] At the same time, what is most striking, from

[20] As I have already shown in detail in Section 4.3, these anxieties are dealt with by denigrating women that do not conform with the prescribed model of femininity, in ways that are exemplified in the following passage: "The prude and the pedant

the point of view of a twenty-first-century reader of nineteenth-century advice literature for women, is how resilient such discourses of oppression continue to be.

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are often firm friends, each adoring the other. The fast young lady deals largely in epithets: "Idiot, dolt, wretch, humbug," drop from her lips; but the prude and her friend the blue-stocking permit themselves to use conventional phrases only; their notion of conversation is that it be instructive, and, at the same time, mystifying. The young blue-stocking has, nevertheless, large views of the regeneration of society, and emancipation of woman from her degrading inferiority of social position. She speaks in measured phrase; it is like listening to a book to hear her" (*The Habits of Good Society*, Anon. [1859: 269]).

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